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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9585
INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
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AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
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AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
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USEU BRUSSELS
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HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000294

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER, CAMP), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 32

Ref: A) Colombo 287 B) Colombo 282 C) Colombo 279 D) Colombo 277
E) Colombo 265 F) Colombo 258 G) Colombo 250 H) Colombo 248 I)
Colombo 247 J) Colombo 245 K) Colombo 240

¶1. (U) Summary: The March 13 statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights attesting that 2,800 civilians have died in fighting in the north since January 20 and that the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) may have committed "war crimes" met with angry responses by Sri Lankan officials. The World Food Programme (WFP) completed delivery of 500MT of food on March 13, and may depart with a second delivery of 500MT as soon as March 16. The ICRC evacuated over 900 wounded and sick civilians on March 15-16 and will conduct an additional evacuation operation on March 17-18. End Summary.

UNHCHR: Possible "War Crimes"

¶2. (U) On March 13, a statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay, noted, "Certain actions being undertaken by the Sri Lankan military and by the LTTE may constitute violations of international human rights and humanitarian law". The statement decried the "ruthless disregard" for civilian safety in this conflict, noting that shelling deaths have continued in the safe zone even after the Government's February 24 commitment to cease use of heavy artillery. The statement also repeated the UN Office of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator's estimate of 2,800 civilian deaths and 7,000 injured since January 20, and cited a "range of credible sources" for these statistics. (Note: These statistics represent the UN's best estimate based on reports from health officials and INGO local staff in the conflict area.)

¶3. (SBU) The Government responded to the UNHCHR statement by conducting a press briefing on March 14 and by issuing a statement. Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe strongly asserted that "the Sri Lankan armed forces have never, and will never, target civilians." The Minister accused the UNHCHR of using statistics "quoted by LTTE front organizations and their representatives." He expressed disappointment that the High Commissioner did not use other avenues to communicate her concerns with the Government. The Government statement notes that Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative in Geneva will meet with the High Commissioner in expectation of a "correction or total retraction" of the statement.

Food Aid Shipments Continue, But No Medicine

¶4. (SBU) The World Food Program (WFP) reports that the "Vin-Tan" cargo vessel completed discharge of the first 500 MTs and returned to Trincomalee on March 14. ICRC Acting Head of Delegation Anthony Dalziel told Ambassador the shipment had not included medicine, despite GSL pledges. According to WFP, the Government Agent reported distribution of the food to 36,000 families, or 160,000 persons in the safe zone. As of March 16, the ship was loaded with

another 500MT and prepared for departure, to arrive offshore of the safe zone as early as March 17.

ICRC Medical Evacuations

¶5. (SBU) After a delay of two days due to a possible threat to security, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) evacuated 439 critically wounded or sick civilians out of the safe zone on March 15, and an additional 480 persons on March 16, bringing total evacuations to nearly 4,000 persons. A smaller ferry will leave Trincomalee on March 17 for the safe zone. The most recent ferries did not contain medical supplies. ICRC reports that medical professionals in the safe zone, including at Putumatalan Hospital, may have to refuse to provide any health services if they continue to lack even the most basic supplies. The ICRC hopes to deliver medical supplies and chlorine (for water purification) that have been promised by the Government on the March 17 evacuation ferry. ICRC reports that their staff is "overstretched and exhausted"; the organization is attempting to increase the number of expatriate staff present in Sri Lanka. Ambassador will raise with Basil Rajapaksa the U.S. Government's disappointment that medical shipments repeatedly have been blocked, and will note our support support for visas for new ICRC staff.

Reported Civilian Casualties

¶6. (SBU) Tamil sources from within the LTTE-controlled area report 7 civilians were killed and 32 injured on March 13, and 72 killed and 140 injured on March 14-15. Sources report that 1,451 civilians fled into Government-controlled territory on March 14-15. (Note: Such reports from Tamil sources cannot be confirmed and are frequently exaggerated.) ICRC Acting Head of Delegation told Ambassador that as the war front to the west of the safe zone gets closer to the zone itself, the civilians in the zone as well as ICRC staff face a new risk of stray bullets. An ICRC staffer took a round in the chest over the weekend (March 14-15).

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